DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 043 HE 024 865

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TITLE Three Into One Did Go--Development of a Common First Year Curriculum. AIR 1991 Annual Forum Paper.
PUB DATE May 91
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research (31st, San Francisco, CA, May 26-29, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Education; College Freshmen; *Core Curriculum; *Curriculum Design; Curriculum Evaluation; Foreign Countries; Higher Education
IDENTIFIERS *AIR Forum; *Napier Polytechnic of Edinburgh (Scotland); Scotland

ABSTRACT

Three undergraduate degrees (in Accounting, Business Studies and Commerce), developed at different times by different departments at Napier Polytechnic in Scotland, introduced a common first year curriculum in 1987-88. For some time the Polytechnic had recognized the need to increase flexibility between courses and to provide students with the maximum number of choices and progression routes, and the initial proposal to develop a common first year was submitted for discussion in September 1985. A faculty progress review committee was established that year, and in subsequent years working parties and student representatives were also involved. In the end a compromise was adopted with agreed upon structure, assessment procedures, exemptions, and elective subjects. A statistical analysis of examination performance, comparing the progress of students following the common curriculum since 1987-88 with those involved in the separate degrees in Sessions 1984-85, 1985-86 and 1986-87 found that there was no statistically significant difference between pass rates in the 3 years prior to and the 3 years after the introduction of the common first year. However, benefits have included improved introduction to information technologies, a broader base and lighter work load for Accounting students, and a more rational structure between the three degrees. The paper includes three tables and four references. (JB)

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NAPIER POLYTECHNIC
OF EDINBURGH

Three Into One **Did** Go – Development of a Common First Year Curriculum

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Presented at the AIR 31st Annual Forum:
"Building Bridges – for the Twenty–First Century"
San Francisco, California, USA
26 – 29 May 1991

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AIR
for Management Research, Policy Analysis, and Planning

This paper was presented at the Thirty-First Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at The Westin St. Francis, San Francisco, California, May 26-29, 1991. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum Papers.

Jean Endo
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THREE INTO ONE DID GO: DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMON FIRST YEAR CURRICULUM

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ABSTRACT

THREE INTO ONE DID GO: DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMON FIRST YEAR CURRICULUM

Three undergraduate degrees in Accounting, Business Studies and Commerce, developed at different times by different Departments in one Polytechnic Faculty, introduced a Common First Year Curriculum in Session 1987-88, despite the misgivings and warnings of the Visiting Panel conducting a review of the Faculty in 1987.

This paper reviews the administrative and academic processes involved in its introduction, and presents a statistical analysis of examination performance, comparing the progress of students following the common curriculum since 1987-1988 with those involved in the separate degrees in Sessions 1984-85, 1985-86 and 1986-87 and is aimed at administrators and academics considering increased flexibility.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Initial Proposal to Develop a Common First Year Curriculum

In September 1985 the Dean of the Faculty of Professional Studies, following discussion with the Course Co-ordinators (Course Leaders) of the Faculty's three full time degrees in Accounting, Business Studies and Commerce, submitted a discussion document to the Faculty Board proposing the development of a common first year for the three degrees.

1.2 The Rationale for the Proposal

For some time the Polytechnic as a whole, and the Faculty in particular, had recognised the need to increase flexibility between courses to provide students with the maximum degree of choice and progression routes within the educational system. In particular the needs of first year entrants, mainly progressing directly from the school to the Polytechnic environment, and many studying subjects and disciplines for the first time, were addressed. It had been recognised that many first year students were unsure of their aptitudes and abilities in relation to specific disciplines and it was argued that, by introducing a common first year, students would be allowed to sample a variety of subjects in business education, in the widest sense, which would enable them to decide whether or not their original interest in a specific course had been borne out and whether or not they had an aptitude for that particular discipline. The common curriculum would then give students, who believed that their first choice of course had been a wrong choice, the option of transferring to a different degree, on completion of the first year, without loss of time and with no need for access or bridging courses in any specific subjects.

In addition to increased flexibility it was suggested that additional benefits of this proposal would be the opportunity to provide a broader base for each of the degrees; the possibility of introducing common assessment regulations, with the attendant benefits for examination administration; the opportunity to revise and develop teaching methods and extend the use of student centred learning; and the opportunity for students to integrate socially across the three degrees. It was recognised that there was also the opportunity for common lectures although the question of appropriate lecture accommodation was raised.

It was likely that there would be some resource saving but this could not be quantified at this stage as the numbers were uncertain, as was the available accommodation. This was, properly, regarded as a peripheral issue in the discussions.

1.3 Outline Proposals for Discussion

It was underlined that any first year structure must underpin the later years of the individual degrees and allow the students to make an informed decision regarding their course choice at the end of their first year of study. A shift away from the traditional five or six subjects, (Table I), to the following three larger subject areas was proposed:

(a) The Economic and Financial Framework of Business (financial accounting and economics)

(b) Business Organisation and Society (organisational aspects of business, behavioural science and the legal framework)

(c) Information Systems and Quantitative Methods (computerised information systems, mathematical and statistical concepts)

TABLE 1 **NAPIER POLYTECHNIC**

FACULTY OF PROFESSIONAL STUDIES

Structure of the First Year in each of the Faculty's

Full Time Degrees Prior to 1987

BA ACCOUNTING	**Total Hours Per Week** (Student Hours)
Financial Accounting	3
Management Accounting	2
Economics	3
Law	2
Info Systems & Quantitative Methods	3
Behavioural Science	3
TOTAL	16
BA/BA(HONS) BUSINESS STUDIES	
Accounting I	3
Business Law	3
Business Maths	3
Business Organisation	3
Economics	3
Seminar	1
TOTAL	16
BA/BA(HONS) COMMERCE	
Behavioural Science	3
Business Organisation	3
Law	3.5
Quantitative Methods	3
Office Services/Admin	4.5
TOTAL	17

In addition it was suggested that there should be weekly seminars on study and learning methods and course and career choices.

It was recognised that the introduction of a common first year would have implications for the later years of the Degrees, with the added complication that the degrees varied in length and structure:

BA Accounting	- 3 Years Degree
BA Business Studies	- 4 Years Degree/5 Years Honours with one year Industrial Placement
BA Commerce	- 4 Years Degree and Honours with 24 weeks Industrial Placement.

It was stressed that individual course identity must be maintained, as each course had established a distinct market, in terms of students and employers, and to maintain the sense of commitment felt by staff to an individual course. All of the Boards concerned, while confirming willingness to discuss the proposals further, expressed serious reservations as to the wisdom of introducing a common first year curriculum.

2. THE DEVELOPMENTAL PROCEDURES

2.1 Establishment of a Faculty Committee

A Faculty Progress Review Committee was established on 27 November 1985 to consider the scope for commonality in three identified areas:

(a) Foundation Stage Curriculum

(b) Assessment/Progression Regulations

(c) Optional/Elective subjects in the final stage of the courses.

The Committee met nine times between November 1985 and September 1986, reporting regularly on progress to the Faculty Board and to the Degree Boards of Studies, and with the Chairman attending specific Board of Studies meetings, as and when requested to do so, to discuss any particularly thorny issue. So far as syllabi were concerned discussion extended outwith the formal Committee/Board of Studies arena and involved individual discussion with syllabi authors, Heads of Department, representatives from appropriate Professional Bodies and students.

2.2 Boards of Studies Involvement

In tandem with their representation on the Faculty Progress Review Committee each Board of Studies established a Working Party in January 1986, to explore the implications of the proposals emanating from the Faculty Committee for their own specific degree. These Working Parties reported regularly to their parent Board of Studies where particular issues and concerns were discussed more fully and the outcome of those discussions fed back to the Faculty Committee.

2.3 Student Involvement

Representatives of the student body are elected each session to serve as full members on the Board of Studies for every course in the Polytechnic. Thus students from each year of each of the Degrees were closely involved in the deliberations undertaken by the Board of Studies. They, in turn, discussed the proposals and concerns with their colleagues and brought the students' views to the attention of the Board.

In addition, in May 1986, a first year student questionnaire was compiled for distribution to first year students on the three Degrees and from this study it became clear that only a minority of students would have considered transferring courses on completion of their first year of study. This calmed the fears of the three Boards of Studies that there might be mass transfers with consequent resource implications for the second year of the degrees.

2.4 The Final Outcome

2.4.1 Obstacles Overcome

There were many obstacles to be overcome before a common structure could be agreed that met the requirements of the three degrees without distorting their aims and objectives in relation to the perceived needs of the students and of the employers. In particular the needs of the Accounting Degree in relation to maintaining exemptions from the Professional Accounting Bodies was a constraining factor on the structure and mix of subjects that could be adopted.

Each Board rejected the initial proposal to adopt three subject areas on the grounds that there would be insufficient time available to each "subject" within an area to allow a meaningful syllabus to be devised.

The possibility of awarding exemptions from end of year examinations to students who had performed particularly well in coursework was discussed at some length and, while each Board expressed some concerns regarding the authenticity of students' coursework, should good coursework exempt them from final examinations, the BA Commerce Board in particular voiced serious misgivings regarding the introduction of such an Exemption Policy.

The Boards of Studies recognised that their differing assessment regulations would have to be rationalised, yet, while all of the Boards supported an assessment structure based on coursework and examination, opinions were divided as to whether or not students should be permitted to resubmit coursework to attain a pass mark – a Polytechnic prerequisite for entry to the sessional examinations. (McLachlan [1991]).

Each Board had individual considerations to bear in mind with regards the later years of their course and the adjustments that would have to be made to accommodate and build on the new foundation year. While each Board recognised the advantages of increasing the number of optional/elective subjects in terms of giving students maximum choice, this had to be weighed against the need to ensure that sufficient time was given to core subjects to meet the aims and objectives of the course, particularly in relation to student employability, and the need to ensure that students were not overloaded in their final years.

2.4.2 Agreement by Compromise

(a) Structure

Following ten months of extensive discussion at Faculty and Board of Studies level, involving staff, students, external examiners and relevant Professional Bodies, through goodwill and compromise, an agreed Common First Year structure, (Table 2), was adopted by the Faculty Full Time Degrees for inclusion in their Re-Submission Documentation to be reviewed by CNAA.

Table 2 **NAPIER POLYTECHNIC**

FACULTY OF PROFESSIONAL STUDIES

Common First Year - Structure Agreed in 1987

Subject	Timetabled Work Hours Per Week	No of Weeks	Total Hours Per Session
Accounting	3.5	30	105
Behavioural Studies	2.5	30	75
Business Organisation	2.5	30	75
Economics I	2.5	30	75
Information Systems and Quantitative Methods I	5.0	30	150
Seminar	1.0	30	30
	17.0		510

(b) **Examination/Assessment Procedures**

In addition common examination and assessment procedures were agreed with four of the five first year subjects being assessed by a combination of coursework and examination, coursework contributing 30% towards the end of year subject mark and the examination contributing 70%, with students being required to achieve a subject mark of at least 40% and minimum marks in the Coursework and Examination components of 40% and 35% respectively. Students failing to achieve 35% in the end of session examinations will normally be required to resit the examination and obtain a minimum mark of 40%.

Satisfactory completion of coursework is a pre-requisite for entry to the end of session examinations and during the year,

after counselling, the student may be allowed to re-submit a piece of coursework which is unsatisfactory or alternatively to satisfactorily complete an alternative piece of coursework. The maximum mark which may be awarded for such work is 40%.

In the case of the fifth subject, ISQM, performance is assessed 100% by coursework set throughout the year.

(c) **Exemption Structure**

Any student displaying exceptional merit in any subject area during the first two terms of the first year may be exempted from a maximum of two sessional examinations at the end of that year. The student's performance in coursework, including the presentation of tutorial papers and mid-sessional examinations, will be considered and any student achieving an average mark of 65%, with no single mark below 60% will normally be recognised as having displayed exceptional merit. At the discretion of the Board of Studies, at the commencement of the third term, such a student may be offered the option of exemption from the end of session examination in the relevant subject, to a maximum of two exemptions. Any student may decline such an invitation opting to undertake the end of session examination. For those students who do accept exemption the average of their coursework marks will be taken for Examination Board purposes.

(d) **Optional/Elective Subjects**

To a lesser extent a degree of commonality between optional/elective subjects in the final years of the Degree programme was adopted by the BA Commerce and BA Business Studies Degrees.

3. SCRUTINY AND REVIEW

3.1 Procedures in Force in May 1987

By January 1987, Napier had applied for, and had been granted, Delegated Authority by CNAA. (McLachlan and Wood [1990]). Under delegated authority the Academic Board was ultimately responsible for the academic health of its CNAA taught courses, and of the Institution as a whole. The main shift in emphasis was that, whereas prior to 1987 the validation procedures had been CNAA driven, under delegated authority they became Institution driven, with representatives from CNAA in membership of the validation and review panels.

In previous discussion with CNAA, the validating body for the Polytechnic's degree and postgraduate programmes, it had been agreed that the dates for the review of the Faculty's CNAA courses should be rationalised with all such courses being considered together during a review of the Faculty as a whole. This agreement had postponed the review procedures until the academic session 1986-87 and thus it was under these new Delegated Authority procedures that the "academic health" of the Faculty, and its suitability in relation to the teaching of its CNAA courses, was to be assessed in May 1987. Not only new procedures but also a new concept with a Faculty as a whole, rather than an individual course, being under scrutiny.

In 1987, the entire documentation was scrutinised by a Faculty Sub-Committee (26 February), an Academic Standards Scrutiny Panel (18 March) and the Chairman of the Academic Planning Committee - responsible for resources - before being submitted to the Scottish Education Department for confirmation of that Department's continued support for the courses under review in their revised format.

3.2 Outcome of the Academic Standards Scrutiny

While the Academic Standards Scrutiny Panel was satisfied with the general standard of the courses under consideration and was impressed by the enthusiasm of the staff as a whole, severe reservations were expressed at the wisdom of introducing a common first year across the three degrees without "piloting" the idea - perhaps across two degrees, or for certain subjects in the first instance. The panel's concerns encompassed the worry that large numbers of students might wish to transfer courses at the end of their first year of studies, with consequent resource implications for the later years, and that the administration of all aspects of the common first year, from admissions through to assessment, would be exceedingly complex. The proposal was passed for submission to the Faculty Review bearing these reservations in mind.

3.3 Faculty Review

3.3.1 Programme for the Event

The review of the Faculty extended over the two days 6-7 May 1987 with four representatives from CNAA in membership of the Validation Panel. The programme was made up of private panel meetings, general discussion sessions and a series of parallel sessions with course teams to discuss issues pertinent to individual courses and to cross-departmental/ cross-course developments, and issues highlighted in the annual scrutiny of courses conducted by the Faculty. (McLachlan and Wood [1991]).

In addition there were formal and informal sessions with the students and the external examiners associated with the Faculty's CNAA courses to ascertain their views.

3.3.2 Outcome of the Faculty Review

Despite a number of setbacks during the two day event and the very real concerns expressed by the Validation Panel regarding whether or not students would benefit from a common first year; whether or not progression rates would be affected; whether or not the subject content would be appropriate for successful completion of the later years of each degree and with the complexity of administering the common curriculum and its attendant resource implications, particularly in relation to computing facilities, the panel was impressed by the commitment and enthusiasm of the staff and by the supportive comments of the students and of the external examiners.

The Panel approved the introduction of the common first year subject to the appointment of a common first year Co-ordinator, to oversee the administrative aspects of the year, and the establishment of regular meetings of the three Course Co-ordinators to monitor student performance and progression.

3.3.3 The Faculty's Response to the Review Panel's Recommendations

A Common First Year Co-ordinator has been appointed each year since the common curriculum was introduced in Session 1987-1988 and a Common First Year Review Committee was established by the Faculty Board in June 1988 to review the academic performance of the first year students, their progression in the later years of the courses and to consider wider issues relating to assessment and the administration of the common curriculum.

3.4 Action Arising from the Monitoring Procedures

3.4.1 In the First Three Years

The Common First Year Review Committee has identified and remedied a number of problems arising during the first three years of operation of the common first year. From Session 1988-89, the use of individual answer books for each question in each examination was introduced to allow examiners to mark one specific question across the three degrees thus ensuring standardisation of marking.

The need for a bigger lecture theatre to avoid the need for common first year classes to be divided into two has been stressed to the Faculty and to the Polytechnic. Agreement has been reached for a new lecture block to be constructed at the Sighthill Campus, including a lecture theatre to seat 250-300 students, with an anticipated completion date of September 1992.

There has been considerable discussion of the practice of holding fortnightly tutorials in Economics and Behavioural Studies and the views of some staff and of many students, that weekly tutorials would be preferable, have been discussed. However, in view of the good examination results achieved overall, and the resource implications of weekly tutorials, the Committee recommended that fortnightly tutorials should be retained.

The Committee's strong recommendation that administrative support be given to the Common First Year Co-ordinator has not yet been acted upon. However, with the expansion of the administrative staffing of the Faculty in January 1991 it is hoped that, in time, he/she will be relieved of some of the administrative tasks associated with the Common First Year.

3.4.2 To The Future

The Committee will continue to closely monitor the performance of the students as they progress through their chosen degree, to satisfy the Faculty and the Polytechnic that the structure of the common curriculum has indeed underpinned the later years of each course and has provided a solid base on which students can build greater knowledge whether or not they remain on their first choice of course or choose to transfer to a different discipline on completion of their first year of study.

4. THREE YEARS ON - THE THREE DEGREES - A CASE STUDY

4.1 The Development Stage - Difficulties and Compromise

In relation to the BA Accounting, the majority of graduates go into one of three of the main UK Accounting Bodies with the aim of becoming qualified accountants.

It was essential that great care be taken in the re-negotiation of the internal content of the Accounting Degree at Napier, to ensure that the move towards the dilution of the accounting content, with a reduction from 5 hours per week to 2½ hours per week, later raised to 3½ hours per week did not penalise those students pursuing an Accounting qualification, in terms of a reduction in the level of recognition granted by the Professional Bodies. (McLachlan [1991]).

The three main Professional Bodies are:

(1) The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland, (ICAS)

(2) The Chartered Association of Certified Accountants (ACCA)

(3) The Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA)

each of which assesses accounting degrees for their relevance. Recognised accounting degrees must be renegotiated for the level of acceptance/recognition with each major change in degree content. (McLachlan [1991]).

The original proposal to align accounting and economics was rejected after much discussion. Instead agreement was reached for the hours devoted to accounting to be increased and for the law area to be dropped entirely from the first year, delaying its introduction until second year.

These moves recognised the views of the staff and of the accounting bodies that a wide accounting base in the first year would be essential to ensure that the heavier accounting content in the later years would be built on a sure enough foundation and would permit students to mature for a year before tackling the subject of law which benefits from a rather more mature student approach. This change also had the effect of reducing the number of subjects to five. This was considered to be better than the previous six subjects - a heavy challenge for many students straight from school.

The accounting bodies were at first rather hostile to the idea of a reduction from two accounting subjects - financial accounting and management accounting with a total of 5 hours per week, to the original proposal of one subject - accounting with 2½ hours per week. These hours were later raised to 3½ hours and this change demonstrated a sufficient accounting emphasis to make the change acceptable to the accounting bodies.

The other two degrees in Business Studies and Commerce did not have the same external pressures and constraints and were more easily aligned, albeit with considerable discussion, with the new format.

4.2 Analysis of Results - The Three Degrees

It is only now that an analysis of the position before and after the introduction of the Common First Year in the three degrees is possible (Table 3). A comparison of the three years before and after its introduction, shows a Z statistic ranging from - 0.49 to 1.18 and an overall figure of 0.86, which means that there is no statistically significant difference between pass rates in the three years prior to and the three years after the introduction of the Common First Year.

Table 3 **NAPIER POLYTECHNIC**

ANALYSIS OF EXAMINATION PERFORMANCE IN THE THREE DEGREES 1984-1990

Students	BA Accounting	BA Business Studies	BA Commerce	Total
Pre Common First Year 1984-1987	136	208	203	547
Passed	124	177	173	474
Pass Percentage	**91%**	**85%**	**85%**	**87%**
Post Common First Year 1987/1990	184	278	252	714
Passed	160	241	206	607
Pass Percentage	**87%**	**87%**	**82%**	**85%**
Z Statistic	1.18	-0.49	1.00	0.86
Significant at 5% Level	**No**	**No**	**No**	**No**

This supports the expectation of the course teams that students would not be disadvantaged by the introduction of a Common First Year.

4.3 General Conclusions

With the long lead time involved in the development of the proposed Common First Year, and given the severe reservations expressed by the Academic Standards and Validation Panels, referred to in paragraphs 3.2 and 3.3.2, it is important to attempt to assess the outcome of this radical change in the Faculty's three undergraduate degrees.

The social integration of the students has not been as great as might have been hoped and the problem of large enough lecture theatres to accommodate the whole first year has not yet been resolved. However, the Scottish Education Department has now sanctioned the building of a large teaching block which should finally accommodate the first year in its entirety.

The administrative implications of the change have increased the workload for the Course Co-ordinators who have been responsible for the administration of the Common First Year so far, but their enthusiasm and dedication has ensured that any problems have been resolved.

The computing facilities have kept pace with demand and this has been a major benefit to the students. The Department of Business Information Management has provided a broad based introduction to Information Technology in the First Year Programme laying the foundation for the later years of each degree.

Some teaching resources have been saved and this has been of benefit to the participating departments.

Only Seven students have transferred between degrees with the majority choosing to remain on the course of their original choice.

In the Accounting Degree, the broader base appears to have benefitted the students as has the lessening of the workload with the reduction from six to five subjects. The possibility of exemptions from first year degree examinations has been a particular incentive to perform well throughout the year and has eased the pressure on students during the examination period.

The commonality of the assessment regulations has meant a rational structure between the three degrees, and has removed a source of annoyance for the students.

By any standards it can only be seen to have been an unqualified success. The gloomy forecasts of the problems which might have raised their heads have not been realised, partly at least due to the enthusiasm of the staff, recognised by the Scrutiny Panel, and to the supportive attitude of the students.

This would seem to be a model which could be followed in many institutions as it rationalises staff resources, the provision offered to students and the base level of course introduction to a range of degrees, postponing a final choice by the student until a further year's maturity has been gained, with a valuable experience of conditions in the institution. It also serves as a useful mechanism for persuading staff in different departments and disciplines to work together in the educational and administrative areas.

The successful conclusion of such a proposal requires commitment in those leading the move, and co-operation from the staff and students involved.

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